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# Music for the Eyes and Oars

*One Lake, 48 Rowboats, 144 Chorale Singers—What Could Possibly Go Wrong?*

By CORINNE RAMEY



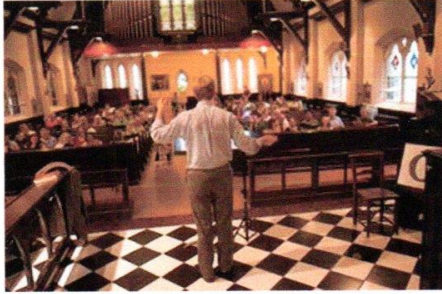
Keith Bedford for The Wall Street Journal

City Opera's general manager and artistic director, George Steel, at Central Park Lake, where he'll conduct a chorale performance on the water on Friday

On Friday afternoon, the helicopters, birds, car horns and other ambient sounds swirling around the Central Park Lake will have some competition: 144 choral singers, many of them in rowboats.

As part of Make Music New York, the annual series that stages concerts in outdoor public spaces around the city, the singers will perform "Credo," a 46-minute choral work by the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, on and around the man-made 20-acre lake at 5 p.m. While mounting a large-scale work is never easy, this one has brought the producers at the Americas Society a unique set of logistical challenges, including: discovering whether singers can row and sing; dealing with the acoustic and visual aspects of a large outdoor space; and figuring out how long the singers can really be stuck in boats without a bathroom break.





Keith Bedford for The Wall Street Journal

Mr. Steel leads a rehearsal at a Manhattan church.

Earlier this week, with the setup still in flux, the plan, according to Americas Society music director Sebastián Zubieta, was to put half the singers in boats in a semicircle formation on the water, and half in a semicircle on the land. The audience will be positioned within the circle, both in boats and ashore. George Steel, the general manager and artistic director of the New York City Opera, will conduct from an elevated platform.

During a recent interview at the lake, Mr. Steel seemed to relish his role as "the talent, not the producer," and was eager to do whatever was asked of him, whether

that meant conducting on land or in a boat, rain or shine. "I'm a producer, and it's very easy, on the producing side, to tell other people to do crazy things," he said.

Last week, Mr. Steel, Mr. Zubieta and eight singers conducted a mini-trial in the park. All of them, including the conductor, rowed into the lake and sang a couple of pieces. (Mr. Schafer, known for his environmentally specific "soundscape" music, wrote "Credo" in 1976 for 12 distinct choirs, double basses and a tape part. The singers on Friday have been plucked from eight nonprofessional choirs around the Greater New York area, including the Collegiate Choral, the Manhattan Chorale Ensemble and the Astoria Symphonic Choir.)

"We figured out that it's very hard to sing and paddle," said Mr. Zubieta. During the actual performance, each boat will contain three singers, as well as a rower to keep it in place.

"To see how logistically difficult it was to conduct from a boat or sing from a boat was fascinating," said Mr. Steel. "There are ways to change the acoustics, he explained, like tying the metal boats—the same ones used daily by park-goers—together to create small resonating chambers, or instructing the singers to sing toward or away from the water.

Then there are the more mundane problems. "There's the question of, once you row out and have a rehearsal, is there time to row back and go to the bathroom before the show?" said Mr. Steel.

"The answer is no."

He figured that the performers would be in the boats for about three hours. "Singers need to be hydrated," he said. "It's an issue."

"Lake Music," as the program is called, will mark the fourth time that Central Park Lake has become a stage for a Make Music New York performance. Also on the lake Friday, 12 trombonists will perform movements from Mr. Schafer's "Music for Wilderness Lake" at 7:30 a.m. and at 8:15 p.m.

While Mr. Zubieta isn't too worried about the legal ramifications of having performers on the water—the singers are all volunteers—they did had to sign releases in order to participate. "It's similar to what the Boathouse asks," he said. "You never do anything crazy on the boat."

On Monday night at the Church of the Resurrection on East 74th Street, the singers crammed into the pews for a dry rehearsal. Mr. Zubieta played a starting pitch on the organ, and then, realizing the choirs wouldn't have starting pitches on the lake, mashed a cluster of notes. "That approximates the sound of a cab right there," Mr. Steel said.

The singers laughed, but finding pitches outdoors, where they'd have a harder time hearing one another, was a real concern. Mr. Steel repeatedly encouraged them to use smart phones or other devices with pitch-producing applications. "When you find your boat has drifted 10 feet away from everybody else and you have a high A, you want to be confident," he said.

The music was atmospheric, with staggered entrances and long, slow glissandi that stretched one pitch into the next. "It's a very undulating sound, with overlapping voices," said Jenny Clarke, executive director of the Melodia Women's Choir, which has several members in the performance. "I think the music will waft across the lake."

David Erbach sings with the Manhattan Choral Ensemble, which has 14 members in the event. "None of us know what it will be like until it happens," he said. "But as long as we don't capsize, everything will be fine."

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